



Mining California: An Ecological History

By Andrew C. Isenberg

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An environmental History of California during the Gold Rush

Between 1849 and 1874 almost \$1 billion in gold was mined in California. With little available capital or labor, here's how: high-pressure water cannons washed hillsides into sluices that used mercury to trap gold but let the soil wash away; eventually more than three times the amount of earth moved to make way for the Panama Canal entered California's rivers, leaving behind twenty tons of mercury every mile?rivers overflowed their banks and valleys were flooded, the land poisoned. In the rush to wealth, the same chain of foreseeable consequences reduced California's forests and grasslands.

Not since William Cronon's *Nature's Metropolis* has a historian so skillfully applied John Muir's insight?"When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe"?to the telling of the history of the American West. Beautifully told, this is western environmental history at its finest.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Isenberg's densely written text provides an overview of the industrialization of mining, logging, ranching and agriculture in California between 1850 and 1900 that, while well researched and exceedingly informative, assumes a greater familiarity with North American and California history than most readers are likely to have. However, Isenberg provides a perspective almost entirely missing from other history texts, showing how our forebears' environmental decisions continue to affect our lives. He examines how technologies developed to mine the gold deposits of the Sierra Nevada, to log the redwoods of the Northwest coast and to develop the Central Valley into a productive agricultural region caused profound environmental changes that altered the course of industrialization and politics. Of particular interest is the role that hydraulic mining played in starting the "water wars" that have pervaded Western politics for the past 150 years. He makes a strong case that California, rapidly industrialized before any other Western state, set the model for industrial development in the American West. Most interestingly, he compares the sequestration of Native Americans in reservations and the rise of industrial-scale agriculture to the enclosure of British commons in preceding centuries. The extensive bibliography is rich in primary source material, and the text is thoroughly footnoted. This is not a book for the general reader; rather, it is best suited for an upper-division or graduate-level seminar course.

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Review

"Superbly written. This excellent read, a model for future studies, deserves highest recommendations." ?D. Steeples, *Choice; An Outstanding Academic Title*

"As entertaining as it is insightful, Isenberg's book does justice to the dramatic ecological transformations California underwent in the half century after the Gold Rush. This is environmental history at its best." ?J. R. McNeill, *author of Something New Under the Sun: An Environmental History of the Twentieth-Century World*

"Andrew Isenberg's superb new book analyzes the ecological domino effect set in motion by the California Gold Rush, which touched off the cycles of environmental degradation the scale of which we can only now fully appreciate. Filled with lessons and warnings, *Mining California* is a timely and important book." ?William Deverell, *Director, Huntington-USC Institute on California and the West*

"The book offers a mother lode of descriptions of the sheer scale of projects undertaken, and a keen portrait of the ecological domino effect of new industries.... At a time when the state's residency has been forecast to grow by 13 million in the next 25 years, with its population probably stretching into its farthest regions, *Mining California* offers sobering reading on the consequences of unchecked expansion." ?*San Francisco Chronicle*

About the Author

Andrew C. Isenberg is a professor of history at Temple University. He is the author of *The Destruction of the Bison: An Environmental History, 1750–1920* and is a former fellow of the Huntington Library and the Shelby Cullom Davis Center for Historical Studies.

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